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Buller, Jim orcid.org/0000-0002-7365-2515 and James, Toby (2011) *Statecraft and the Assessment of National Political Leaders : The Case of New Labour and Tony Blair*. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. pp. 534-555. ISSN 1369-1481

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2011.00471.x>

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Statecraft and the Assessment of National Political Leaders: The Case of New Labour and Tony Blair

Jim Buller and Toby S. James

This article makes the case for employing the statecraft approach (associated with the late Jim Bulpitt) to assess political leadership in Britain. Rather than 'importing' methodologies from the US, as some scholars have done, statecraft is preferred in the UK context for two main reasons. First, statecraft is concerned with the motives and behaviour of leadership cliques, and as a result, it is more appropriate for the collective leadership style that is a characteristic of parliamentary systems such as that in Britain. Second, statecraft goes some way towards incorporating a sense of structural context into our evaluation of leadership performance. This need to take into account the broader institutional constraints facing chief executives is something that an increasing number of academics in this area have been calling for. The utility of the approach is illustrated through a case study of the Blair administration.

Keywords: political leaders; prime ministers; statecraft; Tony Blair

Introduction

How the hell can you tell? Only the President himself can know what his real pressures and real alternatives are. If you don't know that, how can you judge performance? (John F. Kennedy, quoted in Schlesinger Jr 1997, 180)

I was obsessed by the thought that this Labour Government had to be different; had to be able to govern for a lengthy term, as Tory governments seemed habitually capable of doing (Blair 2010, 94).

Tony Blair's leadership of the Labour party, both in opposition and in government, has generated substantial comment and controversy. Blair's successes in this role are obvious. Not only did he reform the party so that it became electable after 18 years in opposition, but he is the only Labour leader in Britain to have won three general elections in a row. For others, Blair wasted a wonderful opportunity to recast the contours of British politics, especially when it came to domestic policy. Evidence of his reforming zeal in this sphere only really came to light in the last two years of his premiership, which had already become tarnished by his decision to support the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq. But how should *political scientists* evaluate the tenure of a particular leader? What criteria might we adopt for this purpose? Should such criteria be specific to a particular country, or is it possible to



develop benchmarks that are applicable across a range of political systems? Can our assessment of leadership performance 'escape' our ideological or normative assumptions about the processes of government and the ends that it ought to deliver?

To date, much of the scholarship on leadership evaluation has originated with the study of US presidents. Indeed, some of the methods developed in this work have been employed by British political scientists. Contrary to this trend, this article makes the case for employing Jim Bulpitt's statecraft approach to judge political leaders in the UK. It begins by critically reviewing the existing literature before going on to define, operationalise and justify Bulpitt's concept of elite statecraft. The final section of the article attempts to demonstrate the utility of statecraft by applying it to the leadership of Tony Blair.

Importing from America: Existing Approaches to Assessing Leadership

To date, a number of approaches have been developed for the purpose of assessing political leadership, most of which have originated in the US. One popular method has been to rate American presidents by conducting surveys of 'expert opinion'. The pioneer in this area was Arthur Schlesinger Sr (1948), who asked respondents to place occupants of the White House in one of the following categories: 'Great'; 'Near Great'; 'Average'; 'Below Average'; or 'Failure'. No other criterion was specified, although those polled were requested only to take into account 'the performance of these men as President' and not their contribution to statesmanship outside office, for example in military positions (Schlesinger Sr 1948, 66–67). Since Schlesinger Sr, a range of other scholars have introduced longer and more precise lists of indicators in an attempt to further quantify and rate presidents according to league tables of results. Interestingly, despite this greater methodological complexity, the list of presidential 'greats' (Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Wilson) has remained remarkably similar over the years (Pederson and McLaurin 1987; Murray and Blessing 1994; Ridings and McIver 1997; Schlesinger Jr 1997).

Playing the 'ratings game' has also enjoyed some popularity in the UK, most notably in the work of Kevin Theakston and Mark Gill (2006 and 2011). In their original 2006 study, the authors contacted 258 academics (either political scientists or experts in modern British history) and asked them to evaluate all 20th-century prime ministers in terms of their success, on a scale of 0–10. A mean score for each leader was calculated and a league table of 'performance' was constructed. At the same time, respondents were given a list of characteristics and were invited to pick those three they thought to be the most important for a leader to be judged successful. Top of the list was 'leadership skills', an attribute selected by nearly two thirds of experts, followed by 'sound judgement' (42 per cent) and 'good in a crisis' (24 per cent). Attlee came top of the league table, with Blair ranked sixth out of 20. A similar exercise of post-1945 leaders published in 2011 also put Attlee top but Blair rose to third.

This methodology for evaluating political leaders has been subject to a range of criticisms over the years. Charles and Richard Faber (Faber and Faber 2000, 3) have

complained that the failure by many authors to operationalise in more detail the criteria to be employed makes the precise value of the exercise unclear. For example, we know from Theakston and Gill's survey that a majority of experts rated 'leadership skills' as the most important trait of a successful leader. But skipping over the possible tautologous nature of this conclusion for a second, what do we really mean by 'leadership skills'? It follows on from this question that, despite attempts to produce more extensive lists of indicators for measuring leadership performance, such benchmarks on the whole remain too general to be interpreted in the same way by academics. While an impression of objectivity is given, strengthened by the allocation of numerical scores to each leader, all evaluation exercises will inevitably be subjective. Perhaps the best that we can hope for is that our (subjective) criteria offer up a fair and realistic 'test' for chief executives.

Second, as Theakston and Gill (2006, 194) themselves note, rating political leaders according to an aggregate score across a range of indicators is arguably a too superficial approach to this subject area. It is often the case that leaders will score highly in relation to some functions and poorly according to others. Put in different terms, leaders can be both a 'success' and a 'failure' at the same time (depending on which aspects of the job they are being judged on), and it seems important to try to take into account this more complex picture. To quote Theakston and Gill (2006, 212) directly:

We ... need a broader, more historically nuanced and contextualised analysis of individual leaders, the ingredients of political/governmental effectiveness and the conditions for success or failure.

Our employment of the statecraft approach attempts to respond to this call for a nuanced perspective (see also Schlesinger Jr 1997, 183; Crockett 2002).

Instead of surveying expert opinion, other academics have attempted to assess political leaders according to their own personal criteria, which are laid out explicitly for the reader in advance. In his book, *The American Presidency*, Clinton Rossiter (1960) reserved the highest praise for US leaders who were active, especially those individuals who took the initiative in times of a crisis. Indeed, David Nice (1984, 445) has argued that the literature is 'practically unanimous' in its view that governing successfully in difficult times is the only way for a president to achieve a reputation for 'greatness' (see also Bailey 1966; Ballard and Suedfeld 1988). Similar views appear to exist within the academic community in Britain. While conveying his scepticism about the value of rating individual prime ministers, Peter Hennessy (2000, 527–533) has argued that presiding over substantial change is a key indicator of successful leadership. In this regard, both Attlee and Thatcher were rated highest for their ability to 'make the political weather'.

Finally, in an influential set of books over the years, Fred Greenstein has come to evaluate American presidents according to their ability to carry out six functions. The first is that of a *public communicator*. For Greenstein, communication skills are now an important aspect of leadership in the US, if for no other reason than that the job places a 'great premium on the presidential pulpit' (Greenstein 2000, 180). Second, presidents should display *organisational capacity*: that is, the ability 'to rally his colleagues and structure their activities effectively' (Greenstein 2009, 5). In

particular, chief executives will want to minimise the tendency of subordinates to tell the boss what it is they think he wants to hear. Third, *political skill* relates to the president's adeptness as an 'operator' or manufacturer of support, both among his colleagues and the broader public as a whole. Such support will allow him to put his stamp on public policy within a system, which otherwise has a tendency towards gridlock. Fourth, a president's *vision of public policy* describes his ability to craft an overarching narrative about the goals of policy and the means to deliver them. This narrative must be both consistent and feasible. Fifth, *cognitive style* highlights how a president negotiates and processes multiple sources of advice in a way that leads to effective decision-making. Sixth, *emotional intelligence* can be defined as 'the president's ability to manage his emotions and to turn them to constructive purposes, rather than being dominated by them and allowing them to diminish his leadership' (Greenstein 2009, 6). These criteria were developed to reflect the means, rather than the ends of government, an aspect of leadership that Greenstein believed to have been neglected. At the same time, Greenstein resisted any attempt to quantify or rank presidents, being impressed by the sheer diversity of those leaders he researched.

This second, more 'qualitative' approach to assessing political leadership avoids some of the criticisms levelled at those studies involved in rating presidents. Theakston (2007 and 2011) and Victoria Honeyman (2007) have made good cases for utilising this approach to assess British prime ministers. However, the work of Greenstein and others raises different questions that need to be broached. One issue highlighted by Greenstein himself is to what extent his criteria for assessing US presidents might be applicable for judging political leaders in parliamentary systems, like Britain? Greenstein seems sceptical, arguing that Britain has more of a tradition of collective leadership, where it is not always the case that 'who occupies the nation's highest office can have profound repercussions' (Greenstein 2009, 2). This argument has received implicit support from other British political scientists who have contested the emerging thesis concerning the 'presidentialisation' of British politics (see, for example, Smith 1999). To make this point is not to imply that the prime minister is not important. Nor is it to suggest that Greenstein's criteria are of no help when it comes to assessing political leadership in Britain. Rather, his benchmarks will have to be revised to account for the peculiarities of governing the UK polity.

A further question is to what extent we should try to evaluate political leadership within the broader structural context within which it is operating. As the quote from Kennedy at the start of this article makes clear, governing involves making political choices in the face of multiple pressures and constraints. Moreover, as the discussion above has implied, this environment will not be static, but will offer up a range of opportunities as well as challenges over time. A political or economic crisis (such as a war or depression) can provide the space for active, creative and courageous leadership (leading to a reputation for greatness). Inhabiting office in tranquil times may condemn a premier to hope for little more than the cultivation of an image of solid competence. In short, taking into account the structural context when assessing political leadership would seem to be important. However, such an admission is not without its costs. It would appear to render any attempt at quantification (and ratings) pretty much impossible. If each leader is faced with a

1 unique set of circumstances, to what extent does it make sense to try to compare
2 them and construct league tables on the basis of such an exercise? (See also
3 Crockett 2002; Theakston and Gill 2006, 211–212)

4
5 In light of these introductory comments, the rest of the article makes a case for
6 employing the statecraft approach to assess political leadership in Britain. Two main
7 arguments are advanced. First (and taking our lead from Greenstein), instead of
8 ‘importing’ criteria from the US, statecraft can provide a set of benchmarks which
9 help account for the peculiarities of governing the UK polity. In particular, Bulpitt
10 stressed the importance of collective leadership, the significance of party govern-
11 ment and the adversarial nature of politics in Britain, compared with other coun-
12 tries. Second, statecraft incorporates an aspect of structural context into leadership
13 evaluation, which has largely been neglected by the existing literature. Bulpitt
14 argued that the ability of chief executives to carry out a ‘vision’ of public policy, to
15 preside over substantial economic and social change, to ‘make the political
16 weather’, will itself be checked by an *electoral* constraint. Put in different terms, the
17 autonomy of all leaders will be limited by the need to gain and retain power over
18 time. The next two sections of the article outline these arguments in more detail.

20 The Statecraft Approach to Political Leadership

21 What is statecraft and what ‘added value’ might it confer on political leadership
22 studies? Bulpitt formally defined statecraft as ‘the art of winning elections and
23 achieving a necessary semblance of governing competence in office’ (Bulpitt 1986b,
24 21). Like Greenstein (and Richard Neustadt before him) Bulpitt was concerned to
25 investigate the means, as much as the ends, of leadership. More particularly, he
26 gave priority to researching how politicians confronted, resolved (or at least
27 managed) a range of governing problems so that their electoral fortunes are posi-
28 tively promoted, or at least not adversely affected (Bulpitt 1995, 520). Bulpitt is
29 perhaps most renowned for his work on the Thatcher government during the 1980s
30 (see also Bulpitt 1983, 1986a, 1988, 1989a, 1989b and 1996). He argued that
31 Margaret Thatcher should be viewed as a very successful premier because her
32 leadership helped to restore the Conservative party’s reputation for governing
33 competence, an image which, ultimately, assisted it in winning three elections in a
34 row.

35
36 While Thatcher’s impact on the Conservative party in the 1980s was clearly impor-
37 tant, for Bulpitt, political leadership in Britain was not confined to the prime
38 minister. Bulpitt was an elite theorist who gave analytical priority to the existence
39 of a leadership clique in his research. While the PM was a key individual within this
40 group, it encompassed a number of other figures including senior party leaders,
41 advisers and top civil servants (Bulpitt 1983, 156 and 1995, 518). Such a concep-
42 tion, arguably, provides a more *realistic appreciation* of political leadership in Britain
43 than those studies that focus just on the PM. Can we accurately assess Thatcher’s
44 premiership without taking into account the contribution and impact of Milton
45 Friedman, Friedrich von Hayek, Keith Joseph, John Hoskyns, Nigel Lawson, Alan
46 Walters, Charles Powell and Willie Whitelaw? It should be noted that one disad-
47 vantage of defining leadership in this way is that the operational content of this

category becomes less clear and open to interpretation. At least if political leadership is viewed as being synonymous with the prime ministership, there can be no confusion or dispute concerning the object of research. If one employs the statecraft approach, it is imperative that academics are careful to specify which individuals belong to the leadership clique(s) under study.

Second, the statecraft approach builds in a notion of the structural context facing political leaders before evaluating them. For Bulpitt, the most obvious element of this environment was the electoral constraint facing all politicians. One of the distinguishing features of politicians as actors is their motivation to gain and retain national government office. But what was the precise nature of this British political system as Bulpitt understood it, and how did it impact on leadership statecraft? First, Bulpitt emphasised the plurality electoral system for national contests, which favoured the Conservatives and Labour, while penalising third parties with nationwide support that was geographically dispersed. Such a system typically meant that elections in Britain were a two-horse race, with the victorious party usually gaining enough parliamentary seats to be able to govern alone. Second, Bulpitt highlighted the adversarial party culture in the UK, meaning that politics is a more competitive game and played at a 'faster pace' than elsewhere. Parties are almost permanently on electoral 'standby', in one very real sense; a party's whole term of office (or opposition) is a practice game for the next general election.

Third, Bulpitt argued that there was a lack of institutional pluralism in Britain, especially in comparison with other countries. There is no powerful elected second chamber at Westminster, no elected tier of regional government or authoritative committee system in parliament. Those elements of institutional pluralism that do exist or have existed (local authorities, nationalised industries) have rarely been viewed by national party leaders as reservoirs of power, even when in opposition.¹ In short, these structural features have combined to ensure that British politicians are constantly concerned (perhaps more so than in other countries) with winning *national* elections above all else. As Bulpitt puts it himself, Britain contains 'a frenetic, preoccupied, restless, querulous set of national politicians. Party leaders must ... aim to win general elections simply because the consequences of defeat ... are so awful' (Bulpitt 1988, 188). Of course, leaders will be constrained by more than this electoral imperative. Our discussion of Tony Blair below will also highlight the significance of economic trends and other forces over which he had little control. That said, office-seeking is clearly an important element of what leaders do, and it seems strange not to acknowledge its significance explicitly.²

If we are to judge political leaders in terms of whether they win elections and achieve a necessary semblance of governing competence in office, how might we operationalise this concept for the purposes of empirical research? In simple terms, we might count the number of election victories that a prime minister presides over. However, this is clearly too limited a criterion for assessing political leadership. Moreover, according to Bulpitt, gaining and retaining power in British politics is related to four more specific statecraft functions to be carried out throughout a statecraft cycle that spans the period between elections. These tasks are party management, a winning electoral strategy, the achievement of political argument hegemony and governing competence. Each will be described in more detail below.

1. *A Winning Electoral Strategy*

If the statecraft approach posits that successful leadership is all about gaining and retaining power, then at minimum, leaders will need a winning electoral strategy. In other words, they will attempt to craft an image and policy package that will help the party achieve crucial political impetus in the lead-up to the polls (Bulpitt 1986b, 21). Of course, there may well be occasions where little momentum is needed. The party might be so far ahead that all that is required is a safe and competent campaign free of obvious gaffes. At other times, the contest may be so close that a superior (or inferior) electoral strategy will make all the difference. It should be added that a winning electoral strategy will also ensure that the party's campaigning efforts are targeted efficiently. As suggested above, Britain's electoral system can ensure single-party government, even though that party routinely fails to procure less than 50 per cent of the overall vote. Moreover, with the outcome of British general elections increasingly being decided by results in a relatively small number of 'marginals', winning the most votes is not the whole story. Winning voters where it matters (geographically speaking) is just as important.

When it comes to operationalising the concept 'winning election strategy', one rough and ready indicator might be to compare figures for party support as expressed in opinion polls from the beginning to the end of the campaign. If it is possible to witness significant change in voting intentions over this period, then we may start drawing inferences concerning the relative effectiveness of the electoral strategies of each political leader. Of course, if we can detect decisive shifts of political support during a very close contest, our assertions about the importance of electoral strategies might be stronger. For example, in 1992, a Conservative pledge to create a 20p tax band in response to Labour plans to raise the ceiling on national insurance contributions to pay for increases to pensions and child benefits may very well have contributed to a late swing in the polls that ensured the Tories were returned to government for a fourth term (Butler and Kavanagh 1992; Clifford and Heath 1994; Gould 1998, 117–130; Mandelson 2010, 130–133).

2. *Governing Competence*

For Bulpitt, gaining and retaining power is about much more than coming up with a winning electoral strategy four weeks before the polls. Leaders (and parties) will be judged on their record over the whole electoral cycle. In this context, for a party to win an election, it needs to cultivate a reputation for 'governing competence'. How can such an image or reputation be created? For Bulpitt, competence is related to questions of policy choice and implementation. Party leaders looking to foster an image of governing competence will not normally choose ideas or policies unless they think these can be implemented within the broader institutional constraints of the British polity (Bulpitt 1986b, 22). We can take this point from the reverse angle. Faced with problems that are difficult to resolve and where decisions may lead to unpopularity, it will be rational in statecraft terms for leaders not to do anything themselves, but to devolve responsibility for these problems to other individuals, groups or organisations. If these individuals, groups or organisations then end up solving these difficult problems, party leaders can claim credit for the

act of devolution. If things go wrong, the self-same leaders will have the option of distancing themselves from responsibility while letting others take the blame.

Understood in these terms, the statecraft approach appears to be supported by the valence model (VM) of voting behaviour (Clarke et al. 2004), although there is little direct evidence from his publications that Bulpitt had this work in mind. At the risk of oversimplifying what is a nuanced theory, the VM makes a distinction between what it terms as 'positional' and 'valence' issues that jostle for prominence on the political agenda at any one time. The former requires the voter to make a spatial assessment on a left-right continuum. Conversely, valence issues arise when there is broad agreement in ideological terms concerning a desired policy outcome, and voters instead choose the party they believe offers the best chance of realising that outcome. In other words, voters will support those political leaders they perceive to be more competent to deal with a problem that is generally believed to be particularly pressing. In such circumstances, the key statecraft task for political leaders is to cultivate such an image of competence, especially in the area of economic management. It is this more general reputation that will be decisive at the ballot box.³

If the statecraft approach and the VM are interlinked in this way, we can therefore operationalise the concept of governing competence by analysing data sets on British public opinion towards a given administration. There are two appropriate data sets for such analysis. First, British Election Surveys (BES) have been conducted since 1964, and have included questions about voters' perceptions of economic competence (but not general assessments of parties' 'fitness to govern'). Second, BES survey research can be supplemented with data from opinion polls providing further information about perceptions of competence on a range of issues. The latter do not go back quite so far and have smaller sample sizes. But they do offer far more time-series analyses since polls are more frequent.⁴ Finally, it is important to cross-reference this material with more qualitative statements from leaders themselves. Do leaders believe the cultivation of an image of governing competence to be politically important? If so, how do they go about trying to create such a reputation?

3. Party Management

In its most basic sense, party management concerns the leadership's association with the rest of the party. However, as Bulpitt notes, the task of party management needs to be disaggregated into its component parts. Party leaders will maintain relations with MPs in parliament, but also the party bureaucracy and the constituency associations. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that each section of the party will want the same thing at the same time—certainly in policy terms. The leadership's rapport with the party overall does not necessarily have to be fraternal or harmonious. Most leaders will settle for a quiescent set of relations, while at the same time being prepared for a much more proactive stance in turbulent times (Bulpitt 1986b, 21). However, if there is a key difference between criteria for assessing British political leaders and, say, US presidents, it arguably resides in the importance of party management. In a political system where parties continue to dominate much of the legislative process, and the overall culture is adversarial, the

stance that leaders adopt towards their backbenchers can significantly affect the formulation of policies. In other countries like the US, leaders are judged just as much on their ability to reach out to opponents and build a broader political consensus.

How might the concept of party management be operationalised for the purpose of assessing particular leaderships in specific temporal and spatial contexts? Borrowing heavily from the work of Philip Cowley, one obvious indicator that might be used is the total number of parliamentary rebellions by MPs.⁵ We could go further (again following Cowley) and consider the proportion of rebellions related to the total number of parliamentary divisions. One problem with this benchmark is that, by itself, it tells us nothing about the *size* of the rebellions, an arguably more significant issue from a statecraft perspective. Perhaps a better indicator of the function of party management is the size of any rebellion in the Commons, especially one that leads to a defeat for the leadership. We might also want to take into account the activity of the party whips on a vote that has produced a rebellion, with a defeat on a three-line whip or confidence motion signifying severe problems of party management.

4. Political Argument Hegemony

In less grand terms, political argument hegemony (PAH) means winning the battle of ideas, so much so that a 'party's arguments become generally accepted, or because its solutions to a particularly important problem seem more plausible than its opponents' (Bulpitt 1986b, 21). Interestingly Bulpitt appears to be rather ambiguous concerning the electoral benefits of this statecraft function. To quote him again:

The extent to which political argument hegemony contributes to a party's overall success is not clear. It may be an attribute which party elites require mostly for their own self confidence and party management (Bulpitt 1986b, 22).

However, many other political scientists would consider the achievement of such argument hegemony as crucial to winning elections in the UK. It is commonly asserted that one of the reasons why the Thatcher government won three elections in a row was down to the party's ability to craft a dominant New Right discourse which gradually changed the ideological climate that surrounded British politics (see, for example, Hall and Jacques 1983; Hall 1988; Hay 1996, ch. 7; Phillips 1998). Incidentally, if we compare Bulpitt to Greenstein in this context, we can see similarities between the two authors. Greenstein's emphasis on communication skills, public policy vision and (perhaps) emotional intelligence clearly relate to this broader statecraft function. Also, this emphasis on the battle of ideas returns us once again to the adversarial nature of politics at Westminster.

How might we operationalise the term 'political argument hegemony' for the purpose of judging political leaders in Britain? One starting point might be to utilise the methodology of Ivor Crewe (1988) in his chapter, 'Has the electorate become Thatcherite?' Using survey data from the BES,⁶ Crewe presented a list of findings

concerning the public's attitude to a range of the Thatcher government's policies on economic, social and foreign affairs. Ironically, Crewe concluded that there was little evidence that the Conservatives refashioned an ideological realignment within British public opinion in the 1980s (see also Garnett 1993). Crewe's arguments have had their critics, most notably concerning the concept of ideology implied in his methodology (Marsh and Tant 1994). Even if we accept his conclusions regarding the failure of the Conservatives to achieve 'political argument hegemony' at the public level, such an assertion does not seem to follow if we shift our analysis to the party political level. Indeed, the considerable evidence of policy convergence between the Conservatives and New Labour in the 1990s shows that the latter believed that the former had significantly changed the values of the British electorate in a rightwards direction, even if the evidence for such a shift is less than compelling. In short, any attempt to operationalise the concept of 'political argument hegemony' for the purpose of leadership assessment must distinguish between dominance at the elite level and the public level.

Re-evaluating Blair

So far, it has been argued that when it comes to assessing political leadership in Britain, the statecraft approach has certain advantages over methodologies that have been imported from the US. To make this point is not to suggest that statecraft and this American literature are mutually exclusive. There is clearly an overlap with Bulpitt's criteria and those benchmarks employed, for example, by Greenstein. That said, statecraft better captures the particularities of governing the UK polity. The rest of this article uses statecraft to evaluate the leadership of Tony Blair and his associates. It should be stressed (again in line with Greenstein) that the intention is not to use statecraft to rank Blair or other political leaders. Instead, the results that this more qualitative and multifaceted approach yield can be compared to the conclusions of Theakston and Gill and others. Some of these similarities and differences will be commented on briefly in the conclusion.

Winning Electoral Strategy

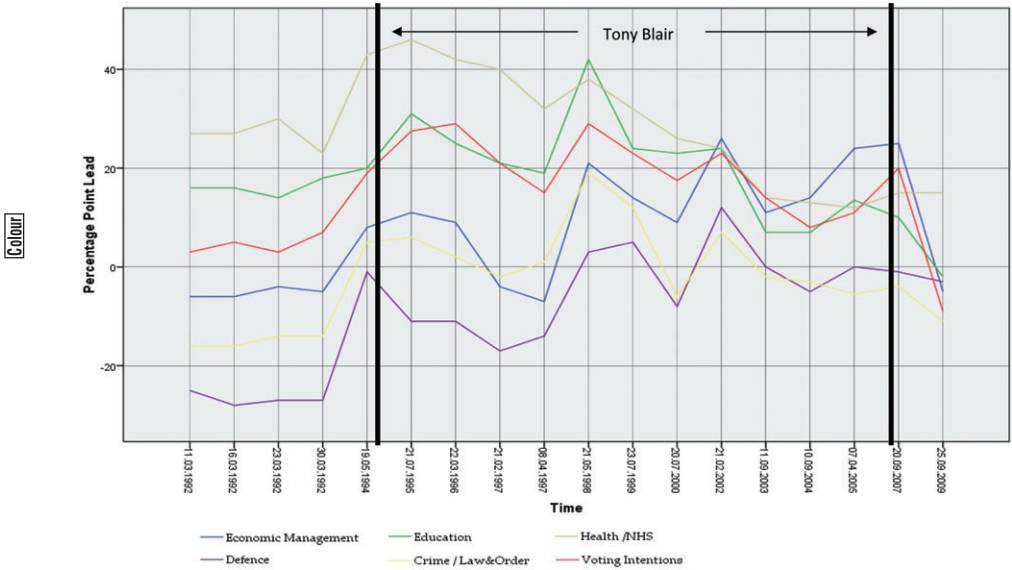
It is clear from the biographies, memoirs and diaries of senior Labour leaders, not to mention the considerable volume of secondary literature, that Blair viewed winning elections as a key task of his leadership (Blair 2010, 2, 43, 94; see also Mandelson 2010, 214, 226, 305). More than this, Blair presided over significant reforms to the way that the party went about conducting election campaigns. Focus groups were employed to discover not just what people thought about politics, but why they held the beliefs that they did. New Labour put together a 'warbook', which outlined the strengths and weaknesses of the party, as well as those of its opponents, and produced a detailed plan of how to exploit them. Aligned to this tactic was a 'campaign grid', which drew up in detail a day-to-day strategy to maximise the opportunities for political success. Finally, the 1997 election saw the creation of a 'rebuttal unit', a giant database of press cuttings, speeches and gossip, which Blair and his associates used to respond to attacks from their opponents. It should be noted that many of these techniques were pioneered by Peter Mandelson

and Phillip Gould in the 1980s, two figures who subsequently became key members of Blair's inner circle. We can already see from this discussion the importance of viewing leadership as a collective phenomenon (see also Anderson and Mann 1997, 360–372; Hughes and Wintour 1990, ch. 4; Shaw 1994, ch. 4).

When it comes to winning elections, there is little doubt that Blair carried out this statecraft function with flying colours. His record of three successive parliamentary terms (with substantial majorities) is unrivalled by another Labour party leader. Figure 1 maps the Labour party's lead over the Conservatives from 1992 to 2009 according to IPSOS Mori polling data. It demonstrates that New Labour remained ahead of the Conservatives in the national polls until 2006,⁷ quite an achievement given that most governments face some mid-term blues in this area. Just as significant was Blair's success in making the Labour party attractive to electors beyond its core working-class vote. Survey research shows that more and more people believed that Blair and New Labour adopted policies that were in tune with middle-class values and aspirations, and this shift in perception was, in part, responsible for the party's electoral dominance after 1997 (Curtice 2007, 40–48). This argument is given added credence when it is remembered that Labour's traditional working-class constituency was widely understood to be in decline as a result of the twin processes of deindustrialisation and *embourgeoisement*.

However we should not be too rosy in our assessment. First, our methodology requires us to assess Blair's record relative to his starting point and Blair had some

Figure 1: Labour Lead over the Conservatives on Key Policy Issues and Voting Intentions



Source: Constructed by IPSOS-Mori Data 1992–2009

1 head start. By Christmas 1992, Labour enjoyed a double-digit lead in the polls,
2 primarily because the Conservatives had lost their reputation for economic com-
3 petence after sterling's ignominious ejection from the Exchange Rate Mechanism
4 (ERM) in September 1992. By the time of John Smith's tragic death, that advantage
5 had been extended to nearly 25 per cent. All Blair had to do was to maintain that
6 momentum. Moreover, during his time in office, Blair's attempts to fulfil this
7 statecraft function were helped by the precise configuration of constituency bound-
8 aries. The geographical dispersion of party support across the UK made the con-
9 version of votes to seats more efficient for the Labour party than for the
10 Conservatives (Rossiter et al. 1999; Pattie and Johnston 2001). Indeed, leaving the
11 issue of parliamentary majorities aside, Blair's record in this area is less impressive.
12 If we look simply at share of the national vote, in the 1997 election Labour polled
13 42 per cent; in 2001, this figure was down 2.4 per cent; whereas in 2005, Blair
14 achieved his third term with the support of just 36 per cent of the British people.
15 This total represented the lowest share achieved by any party that has gone on to
16 form a majority government in Britain (Curtice 2007, 36–40).

18 *Governing Competence*

19 When Blair became Labour leader in 1994, the need for the party to achieve an
20 image of governing competence in economic matters was seen as an urgent priority.
21 This calculation stemmed largely from New Labour's critique of its own past,
22 particularly the experience of the Wilson and Callaghan governments in the 1960s
23 and the 1970s. As Andrew Rawnsley (2001, 38) put it:

24 Of all the failings of past Labour Governments, of all the reasons that not
25 one had two full terms in office, he [Blair] and Brown were most haunted
26 by an economic calamity ... Each previous Labour Government had
27 indulged in a spending splurge early in its life, lost the confidence of the
28 markets, and then been impelled to slash and burn, greatly at the expense
29 of their natural supporters.

30
31 If this was the key dilemma facing the New Labour leadership on the threshold of
32 power in 1997, Blair presided over the following reforms in response. First, opera-
33 tional independence was granted to the Bank of England. While the Treasury
34 retained responsibility for formulating the objectives of monetary policy (in this
35 case an inflation target of 2 per cent), a new Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) at
36 Threadneedle Street would be charged with implementing this goal. Second, two
37 fiscal rules were designed to constrain the discretion of the Treasury, especially
38 when it came to decisions about public expenditure (Balls and O'Donnell 2002,
39 132–154). Just for good measure, Blair and Brown promised to match Tory spend-
40 ing plans for the first two years of a New Labour government, despite the fact that
41 senior Conservative leaders admitted they would not have stuck to these stringent
42 targets if they had won the election. The implementation of these changes was
43 intended to show that economic policy would be free from political interference,
44 thus establishing Labour's credibility, especially with the financial markets (Balls
45 1998, 120–121; Balls and O'Donnell 2002, 17; Brown 1997; Keegan 2004, 155–
46 156; Lipsey 2000, 89–90, 95, 102, 114; Smith 2005, 162).

If Blair and Brown perceived this reputation for governing competence to be a crucial task of political leadership, evidence suggests that they were successful in fulfilling this statecraft function. Operational independence for the Bank of England brought with it the desired economic credibility that Blair coveted. In the period 1997–2007, annual average inflation was 1.7 per cent, compared with 2.2 per cent (1992–97), and much lower than the more turbulent 1970s and 1980s. The Blair governments presided over 40 successive quarters of economic growth, whereas unemployment levels were lower than most of the UK's main industrial competitors. By the June 2001 election, public finances were in a sizeable surplus, allowing Blair to announce significant increases in government spending on health and education (Lee 2008, 17; Sinclair 2007, 186–187; Stephens 2001; Smith 2005, 191–192). But just as importantly (bearing in mind our indicators noted above), under Blair's leadership the Labour party came to be regarded by the electorate as the most trusted to manage the economy. Figure 1 also maps the lead that the Labour party had over the Conservatives by various policy issues according to IPSOS Mori data.⁸ Blair actually entered the 1997 election campaign trailing on the economy. However, once in power, Labour achieved a decisive lead over the Conservatives, which was not challenged until the global financial crisis. Other analyses of BES data also demonstrate that at each of the 1997, 2001 and 2005 general elections, Labour's reputation for economic credibility was far superior to that of the Tories (Gavin and Sanders 1997; Kellner 1997; Sanders et al. 2001; Whiteley et al. 2005).

However, as with his record of winning elections, some qualifications are in order when it comes to judging Blair's leadership against this benchmark. As many commentators have argued, New Labour was blessed with benign economic circumstances during its first 10 years in power, not least at the global level. Although as noted, the UK experienced an impressive record of non-inflationary growth from 1997 to 2007, the origins of this performance can be traced back to the preceding Major government. Not only did 'Black Wednesday' destroy the Conservatives' reputation for credibility in this area, the revaluation of sterling that took place after September 1992 helped to underpin 19 quarters of growth *before* Blair came to power. Moreover, as Colin Hay (2006, 253–254) has noted, while some fluctuations took place in the global economy in the 1990s and the 2000s, these swings were relatively modest compared with the 1980s. Finally, Blair was again heavily reliant on figures around him when it came to establishing Labour's reputation for economic competence. Evidence suggests that the detailed planning surrounding Bank of England independence and the fiscal rules was undertaken by Brown and Balls (Peston 2005). Other accounts of Blair's leadership testify to his lack of interest in economic policy, his willingness to allow himself to be underpowered when it came to receiving advice on the subject (Scott 2004), and even his tactical agreement to hand over all control of this domain to Brown in return for the latter standing aside in the leadership election of 1994. We should certainly include Brown and Balls as part of Blair's leadership clique, despite the well-documented tensions between the Treasury and Number 10.

What if we apply this criterion to another issue, especially one where Blair indisputably played a central role? One interesting example in this context would be foreign policy, especially Blair's decision to support the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

When it comes to examining the relationship between foreign policy and governing competence, not surprisingly Bulpitt argues for the 'primacy of domestic politics'. In general terms, leaders will 'seek to manage the impact of external forces on the domestic political scene such that their general interests (gaining and retaining power) are positively promoted or not adversely affected' (Bulpitt 1988, 181). In practice, these objectives might be achieved through conflict resolution (the Thatcher government and the Falklands War); rational inactivity (New Labour and the euro); or the deliberate politicisation of an issue to make trouble for the opposition party (the Conservatives and defence in the 1980s). When it is also remembered that governing competence is also about trying to choose policies that you are confident of being able to implement in office (no embarrassing U-turns), in foreign policy terms this might mean avoiding prolonged and costly (in terms of lives and money) engagements where the 'national interest' and/or an exit strategy are not clear. From a statecraft perspective, 'great' leadership is not necessarily related to activism in external affairs. The contrast with earlier literature on US presidents discussed above should be noted.

During his 10 years in power, it seems reasonable to argue that Blair engaged in an activist foreign policy, and there is no better example of such behaviour than Iraq. After the tragedy of September 11th, the UK 'adopted the crisis as its own, and universalized its significance' (Coates and Krieger 2004, 43). For Blair, 9/11 represented a terrorist attack not just on the US, but on the civilised world, and it was the duty of that world (including Britain) to respond. However, this strategy of standing 'shoulder to shoulder' with the Americans also gave the impression of locking the Blair government into a course of action it increasingly could not control or justify. This bind was partly illustrated by Britain's frenetic attempts to get a second resolution agreed at the UN, despite seemingly unbridgeable divisions within the Security Council between the US on one side and France, Russia and China on the other. It was also demonstrated by persistent suspicions that ministers were 'sexing up' the threat of weapons of mass destruction, even though a series of inquiries could find no conclusive evidence of this fact. Ultimately, the 'war on terror' seemed foolish from a statecraft viewpoint because it had the potential to drag on endlessly with little hope of eventual victory (Riddell 2004, 149–150, 167).

As a result, Blair's adventurism abroad had an adverse impact on the domestic interests of his government. Robin Cook and Clare Short resigned from the cabinet over the issue of Iraq. It was a source of increasing divisions within the parliamentary party. While the government's eventual decision to go to war was endorsed by MPs at the end of the House of Commons debate on 17–18 March 2003, 139 rebels voted for an amendment arguing that the case for war had not been made (Riddell 2004, 260–263). Iraq was also a contentious question at the public level. It was the source of the biggest demonstration in British history, when 1 million people took to the streets of London to protest in February 2003. While in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, public support for the war stood at 63 per cent, by August half of the electorate thought Blair was embellishing the case for war. By September, two thirds of those polled thought the conflict unjustified (Coates and Krieger 2004, 3–4; Rallings and Thrasher 2004). Understood in these terms, a statecraft interpretation would argue for a more critical judgement on Blair's leadership,

especially when even he admits that his handling of the issue was partly responsible for Labour's diminishing parliamentary majority in 2005 (Evans and Andersen 2005).

When it comes to assessing Blair's leadership in relation to this governing competence function, space does not permit a discussion of all policy domains. However, Figure 1 also charts public opinion (provided by IPSOS Mori) on a range of other issues. The Labour party maintained its traditional lead on the NHS and education during Blair's premiership. This advantage was the product, in part, of the significant increases in public expenditure that were lavished on these sectors after 2000. More notable was the fact that Labour was deemed to have the most competent policies on law and order and defence, traditional vote winners for the Tories. Blair himself fought hard to disarm the claim that the Labour party was 'soft' on crime and disorder, a charge that was perceived to be an electoral liability throughout the 1980s (Newburn and Reiner 2007, 318).

Party Management

When assessing Blair's leadership from a statecraft perspective, party management and governing competence are inter-related. For Blair, the party was viewed more as an obstacle to governing than a source of leadership strength. To quote him directly:

I had read up on previous governments, I had noted the destabilising factor was the relationship between the party and government. When the party was called upon to exercise real power, there immediately came about a dangerous tension between activists and ministers in which the two always ended up divided from each other ... They moved with remarkable speed into inhabiting separate political cultures. The result was an increasing disillusionment with the government from the party, which quickly communicated itself to the public (Blair 2010, 101).

In other words, establishing and maintaining tranquil relations with the party were perceived by Blair to be a priority for his leadership both before and during his time in power (see also Blair 2010, 76, 83, 94–75, 200, 485).

Blair's approach to this conundrum was to institute a number of reforms to the organisation of the party which simultaneously weakened the position of the unions and constituency activists by giving more of a voice to ordinary members in the party organisation. For example, the selection of the party leader, the deputy leader, parliamentary candidates, and members representing the constituencies and the women's section on the National Executive Committee (NEC) were opened up to what were viewed as the more moderate (and malleable) rank and file. At the same time, alterations to the party's policy-making machinery weakened the NEC and conference's traditional power in this area. In particular, Blair's role as chair of the Joint Policy Committee, a body tasked with exercising strategic ownership of this process, ensured that the New Labour leadership controlled the parameters of debate and detailed discussions concerning policy change (for more detail, see Seyd ¹ and Whiteley, 2001; Shaw 2004). In short, these efforts were very successful, but it ²

must be noted that Blair built on Kinnock's earlier stand against Militant in the 1980s and John Smith's implementation of 'one member, one vote' in the 1990s.

However, this trend of increased leadership control over organisational matters gradually came at a price. While party discipline was largely preserved during the first Labour administration, the 2001–05 term 'can lay claim to [being] the most rebellious parliament in the post-war era' (Cowley 2007, 26). Referring back to Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart's indicators noted earlier, Labour MPs defied the leadership in 21 per cent of the divisions during this period. Put a different way, these self-same MPs ignored pressure from the whips to vote against the government on a total of 259 occasions, again more than any post-war parliament (except that of 1974–79) (Cowley and Stuart 2005, 22). There were some big rebellions too. As well as the Iraq vote noted above, opposition by 72 and 65 MPs to top-up fees and foundation hospitals, respectively, represented some of the largest parliamentary revolts in Labour's history. After 2005, even though Blair's majority was substantially reduced, back-bench dissent actually increased, with Labour MPs rebelling in 28 per cent of divisions of the first session of the 2005–10 parliament. For Cowley (2007, 27), one reason for this behaviour was Blair's autocratic style of leadership, especially his 'habit of dropping fully formed policies on them [Labour MPs] and expecting automatic and whole-hearted support'.

Political Argument Hegemony

Finally, as already intimated, the achievement of PAH was also viewed by Blair as a central part of his job. However, there appears to have been a division of opinion concerning how to realise this statecraft function. Blair himself (supported by Mandelson, Gould and Powell) talked continually of the need for New Labour to have a 'vision', 'narrative' or 'project', which could both enthuse the party and engage the electorate. In this approach, he appears to have been inspired by Thatcher and what he believed was her ability to shift the ideological climate of British politics in a rightwards direction. From this understanding came the assertion that if Labour was to enjoy a prolonged period in office, it would have to accommodate 'Thatcherism', modernise and move rightwards towards the 'centre ground'. Brown, on the other hand, seems to have possessed a more limited notion of the ideational and its relationship to electoral politics. According to Mandelson (2010, 111), Brown talked persistently of the need to create, magnify and exploit dividing lines with the Tories as a route to political success. The key task was to persuade the electorate that Labour was on the right side of this dividing line, and that it had the better policies for dealing with the particular issue under discussion. It is this position that appears closer to Bulpitt's own conception of PAH.

Judged against this criterion, there is significant evidence to suggest that Blair's leadership was a failure. As John Curtice's (2007, 48–52) analysis has shown, Blair's efforts to shift Labour to the centre ground of British politics had the unforeseen consequence of shifting public opinion (including Labour's own supporters) further to the right. In future, it will be much more difficult for a party with left-of-centre values and policies to win an election because of this adverse ideological climate. More generally, despite his intentions, Blair never settled on a clear

narrative or vision by which New Labour could be defined. In opposition, he flirted briefly with Hutton's concept of the 'Stakeholder Society', whereas in the first term some time and effort was devoted to defining and operationalising Giddens' notion of the 'Third Way' as a guide to practical politics. In the run-up to the 2001 election, Blair even proposed the label 'post-Thatcherite Britain' to describe the core identity of what New Labour was trying to achieve. But Mandelson makes it clear that this sound bite initially lacked substance, and when Blair finally got round to developing it, he realised it would face too much opposition, especially from Number 11 (Mandelson 2010, 323–331). As a result, it never achieved prominence.

However, viewed in Brown's (and Bulpitt's) more limited way, the Blair government does appear to have won the political argument on issues of key importance to voters. One particular effective theme, especially from 2001 onwards, was the 'investment vs. cuts' refrain. Buoyed by the record of economic stability and growth established in the first term, Labour portrayed itself as the party that would properly fund public services, especially health and education. However, a vote for the Conservatives was depicted as a return to the 'dark days' of Thatcherism, an assertion to which neither Hague nor Howard found a way of effectively responding (Butler and Kavanagh 2001, 102–106 and 2005, ch. 12). Moreover, such an argument appears to have influenced the ideas and policies of the Tories under Cameron (Bale 2009, 227; McAnulla 2010). It is noticeable that, despite the Coalition government's plans to eliminate Britain's large budget deficit by 2014–15, spending on the NHS has been ring-fenced and protected. There is an irony here, which brings us back to the importance of viewing leadership as a collective endeavour: success in this area was due more to the influence of Brown than Blair.

Conclusions

In short, viewed as a collective phenomenon, Blair's leadership should be judged as very successful from a statecraft perspective. As noted above, it won three full parliamentary terms in a row, a feat not achieved by any other Labour leadership clique. Moreover, it significantly altered the methods by which the party fought elections, reforms that remain in place to this day. Similar points might be made about the criterion of governing competence. Not only did Blair and his colleagues re-establish Labour's reputation in this area, but some of the policy changes put in place to fulfil this objective (particularly Bank of England independence) now have a lasting legacy. Although Blair failed to devise a consistent and compelling narrative for New Labour, which had a significant impact on the climate of British politics, the party did win the political argument on important issues, such as greater expenditure on public services. Party management was arguably Blair's least strong suit in the sense that he was unable to prevent the splits between leader and rank and file that had plagued his successors. But overall, Blair's leadership deserves a very high place in any future league table of British prime ministers.

However, statecraft tries to conceptualise leadership within its broader structural context and such an interpretation inevitably leads to a more nuanced conclusion concerning Blair's performance. Beginning with Bulpitt's conception of political structure, the above discussion has stressed the following themes. In electoral

terms, when he became leader Blair found himself in a very healthy situation. Labour was way ahead in the polls and, over time, the precise configuration of constituency boundaries became significantly biased towards the party. Moving beyond the political context, Blair was fortunate in other ways too. He inherited an economy that had been experiencing growth since the mid-1990s. Moreover, as we have seen, the global financial environment was comparatively tranquil. Blair did not have to cope with the aftershock of a prolonged world war, in which the UK lost an estimated one quarter of its total wealth (Attlee). Nor did he have to deal with the gradual disintegration of the Bretton Woods financial architecture (Wilson) or its aftermath (Heath, Wilson again and Callaghan). It is also worth remembering that the ERM collapsed completely (if only temporarily) a year after 'Black Wednesday', indicating that Major's travails were not entirely down to his own mismanagement of economic policy. In short, Blair may have been a successful leader, but this success was achieved in a favourable context.

One final qualification is in order. While the statecraft approach may yield a very positive overall assessment for Blair's leadership understood as a collective phenomenon, many of the specific successes noted above had less to do with Blair himself and were more attributable to those around him. As noted above, Labour's election winning machine was much more the product of reforms pioneered by Mandelson and Gould in the 1980s. Its reputation for governing competence and its political argument hegemony had much more to do with the judgements and policy choices of Brown (and Balls), who at times appear to have operated autonomously from and even in opposition to Blair. In areas where decision-making directly reflected Blair's input, his record is not as impressive. His external adventurism, especially in Iraq, had adverse consequences for Labour's electoral position, not to mention his own political reputation. If we are to continue to equate political leadership in Britain as synonymous with the prime minister, and to evaluate it as such, then Blair should arguably be ranked lower as an individual than in Theakston and Gill's recent surveys.

About the Authors

Jim Buller, Department of Politics, University of York, York YO10 5DD, UK, email: jrb6@york.ac.uk

Toby S. James, Department of Political and Cultural Studies, Swansea University, Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP, UK, email: t.s.james@swansea.ac.uk

Notes

1. The obvious exceptions in this context are the more recently created Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly.
2. The Greenstein approach does not ignore structural constraints and opportunities entirely. Theakston (2011, 81) suggests that 'Greenstein's original formulation of his model was certainly open to the criticism that he neglected the importance of context and the wider political environment. However, Theakston also cites more recent comments from Greenstein which suggest that he thinks that structural context is important. Nonetheless, the Greenstein approach to context is underdeveloped. Greenstein only refers to it in some unpublished work and personal communication with other authors. The approach therefore currently lacks the conceptual practical-analytical vocabulary to incorporate structure explicitly into the model. Moreover, it does not consider the electoral constraint that leaders face, which the statecraft approach does.'

3. It is important to note that the VM contains within it the 'issue priority' model which asserts that political parties benefit differentially from the salience of particular issues. In this context, it will be rational for political leaders to try and promote those issues that they are perceived to have the best policies on, while downplaying those where they are thought to be weakest. Again, this observation seems consistent with Bulpitt's broader elite perspective on British politics, and his brief ruminations on the task of achieving political argument hegemony discussed below (Budge and Farlie 1983; Whiteley et al. 2005, 147–148).
4. For example, IPSOS Mori provides data on voting intentions on a monthly basis since 1976. The IPSOS Mori data are used in the analysis of Blair below.
5. The term 'rebellion' is used to denote an occasion where MPs vote against the party whip.
6. The British Social Attitudes can also be used since this regularly seeks to identify 'left' or 'right'-wing attitudes.
7. Apart from during the fuel blockades of 2000.
8. IPSOS-Mori asked the question: 'Q I am going to read out a list of problems facing Britain today. I would like you to tell me whether you think the Conservative party, the Labour party or the Liberal Democrats has the best policies on each problem'. There was some slight variation in the question over time and also some minor changes in the title of the policy issue. For example 'law and order' became 'crime and anti-social behaviour' during the life of the data. Data were extracted from Ipsos MORI (2011) (accessed 17 January 2011).

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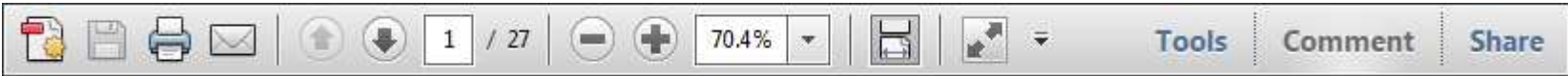
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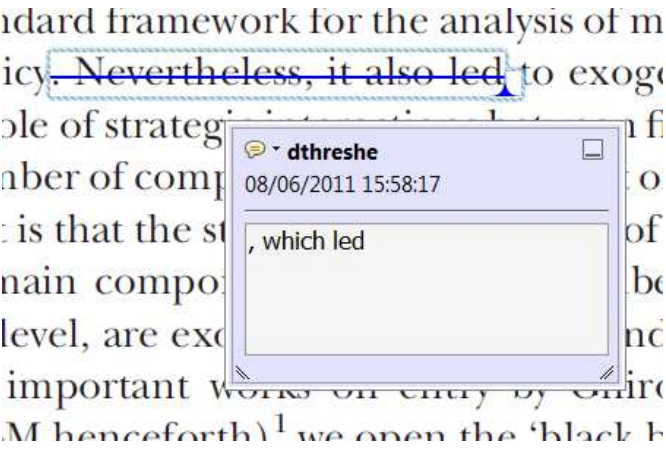
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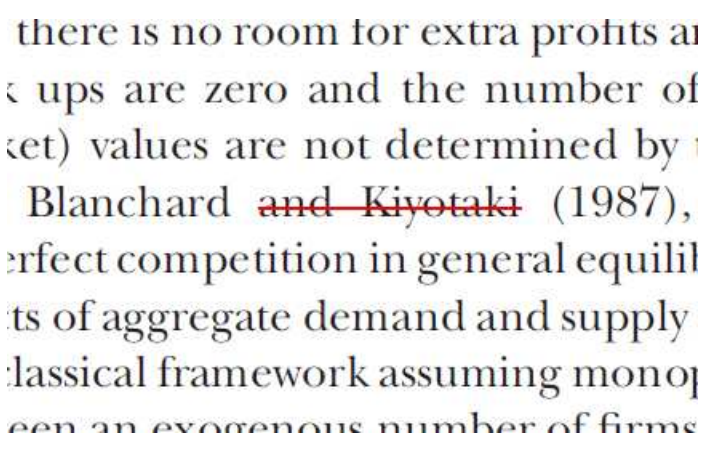
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- Highlight a word or sentence.
- Click on the [Strikethrough \(Del\)](#) icon in the Annotations section.



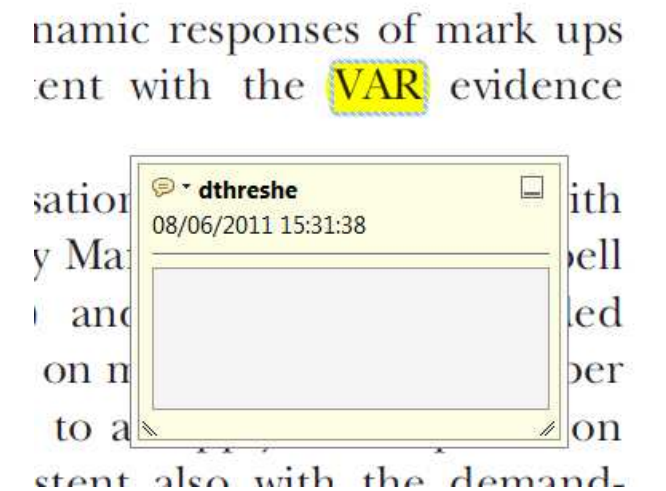
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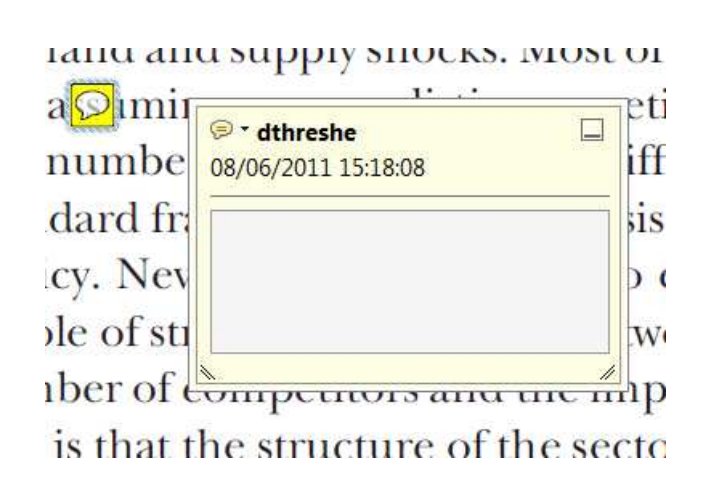
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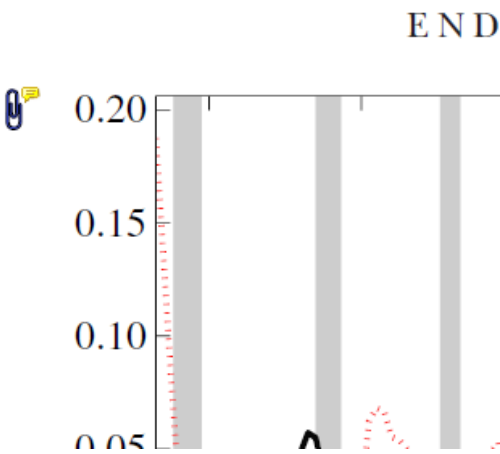


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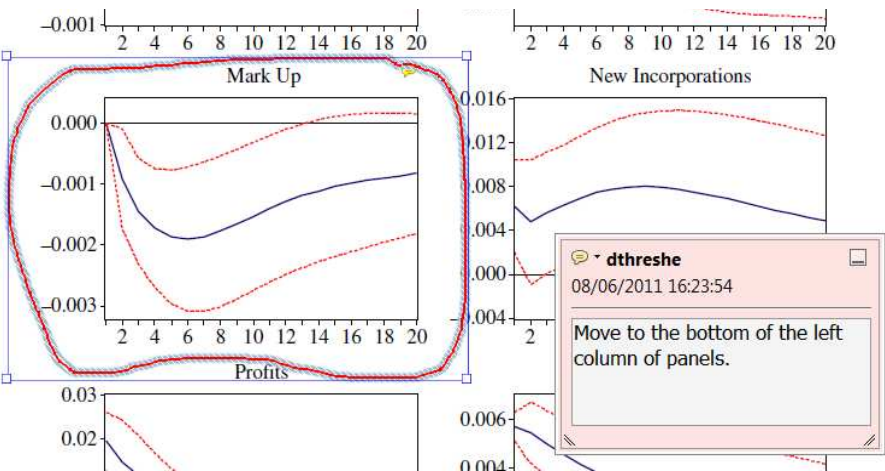


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